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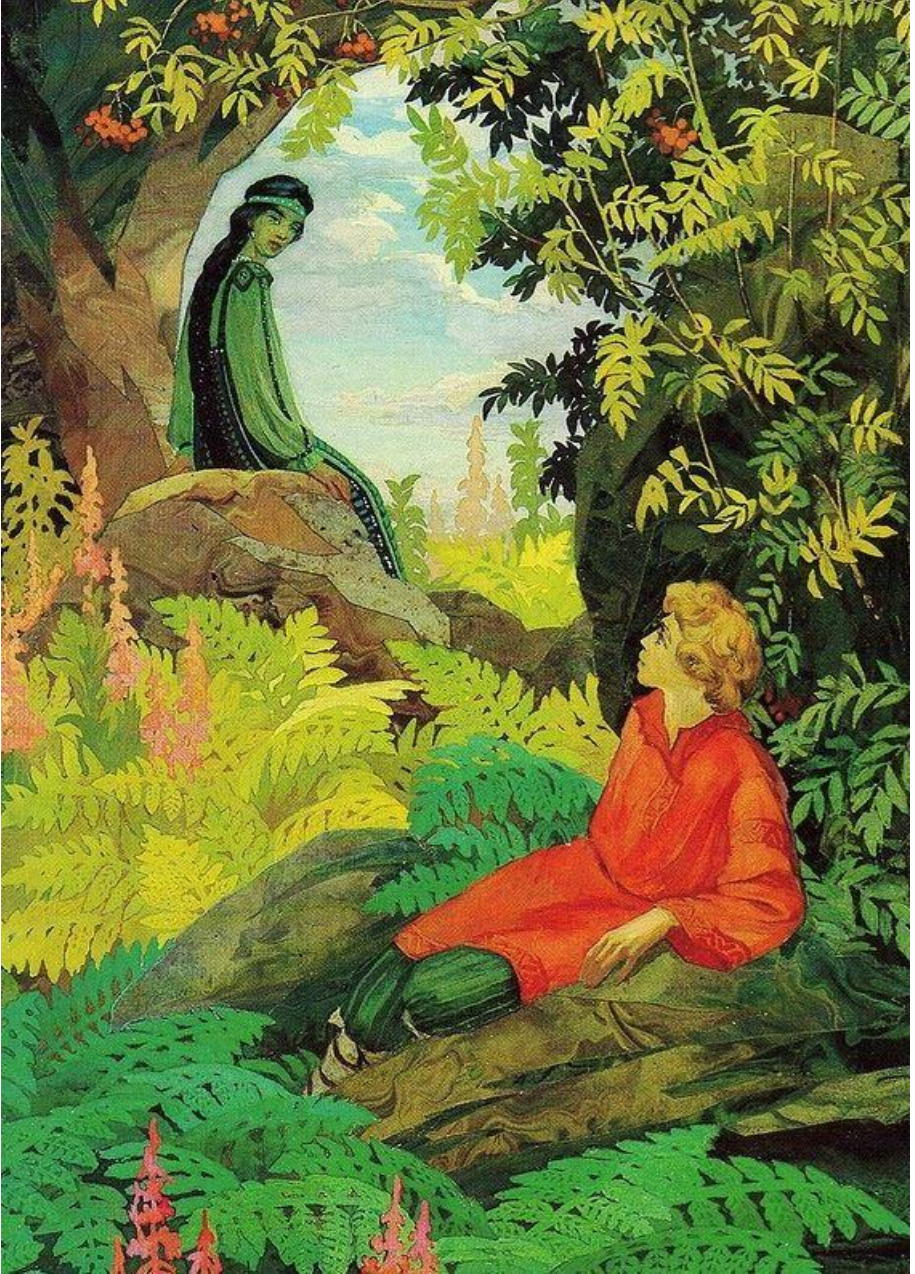
THE MISTRESS OF THE COPPER MOUNTAIN



One day two of the men from our village went to take a look at the hay. Their meadows were quite a bit of a way off. Somewhere the other side of Severushka.

It was a Sunday and real hot. That sort of fine weather you get after rain. Both of them worked in the mines, on Gumeshky. They got malachite, and the kind of stone called lapis lazuli, and sometimes nuggets of copper, and anything else they could find.

One was quite a young fellow, not married yet, but all the same he was pale and tired, with that green look about him. The other was older, and he was quite worn out, his eyes were sunk into his head and his cheeks too. And he never stopped coughing.

It was sweet there in the woods. The birds were singing as happy as you like, the earth smelled good, and the air seemed sort of light. Now, they were both tired, our two. They got as far as Krasnogorsk mine, folks used to get iron ore from it then, and there they lay down on the grass under a rowan, and fell asleep.

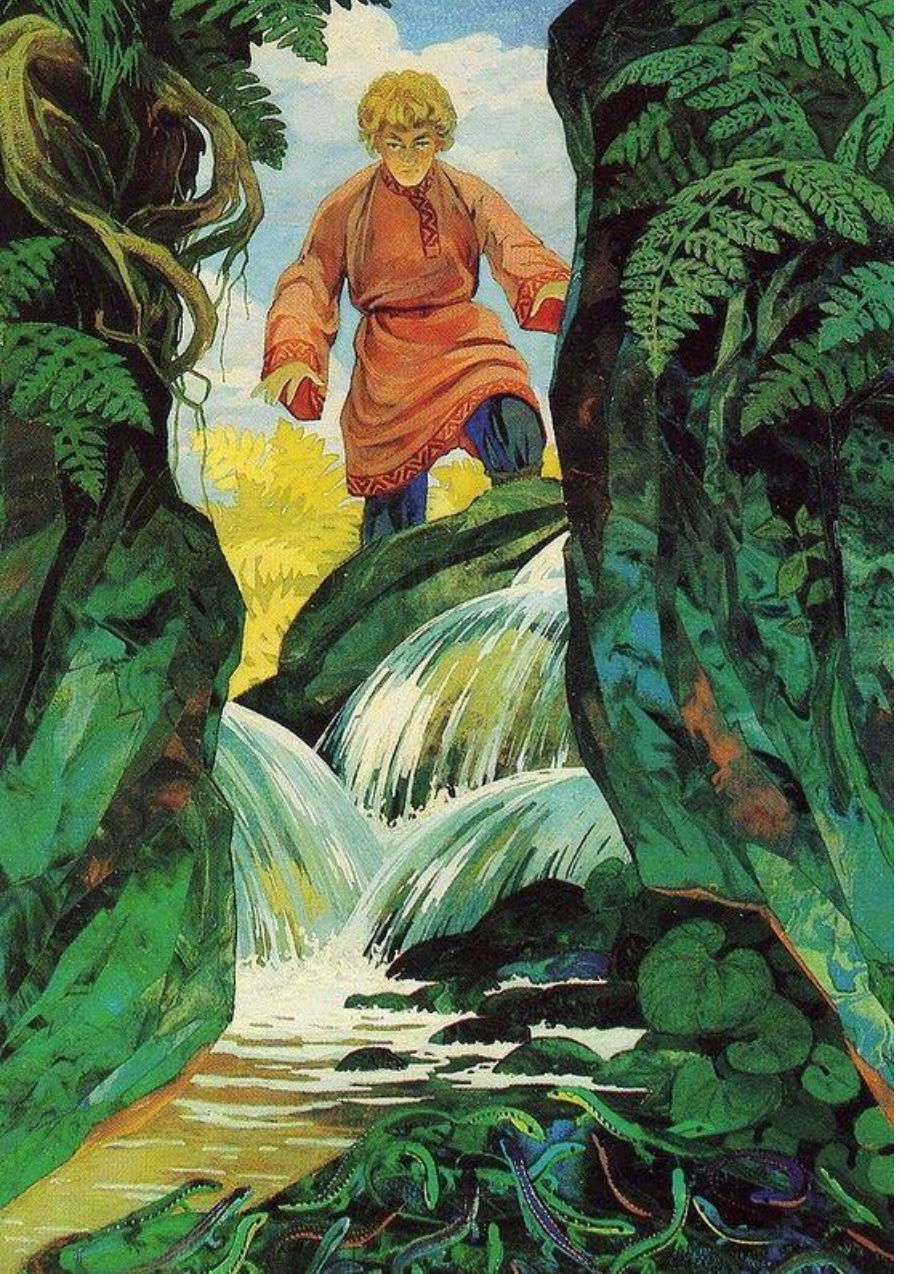
But all of a sudden the young one — it was as if someone had nudged him —he woke up. And there in front of him he saw a woman sitting on a pile of ore by a big rock. She'd got her back to him, but you could see from her plait she was a maid. It was a sort of deep black, that plait of hers, and didn't dangle as our maids' do, but lay close and straight down her back. And the ribbons at the end weren't quite red and weren't quite green, they'd something of both. You could see the light shining through them and they seemed to clink a little, like thin leaves of copper. The lad stared at that plait and then went on looking at her. She was not very tall, with a pretty figure, and she was a real fidget — couldn't sit still a minute.

She'd bend forward as if she was looking for something under her feet, then she'd sit up again and twist to one side and the other, she'd jump up and wave her hands about, then sit down again. Like a bit of quicksilver, she was. And all the time she kept on talking and talking, but what language it was you couldn't say and who she was talking to you couldn't see. But all the time she had a laugh in her talk. Seemed as if she was feeling real merry. The lad wanted to say something, then all of a sudden it hit him like a blow over the head. Mercy on us, why, that's the Mistress herself! That's her robe. Why didn't I see at once? It was that plait of hers I kept looking at....

Her robe, now, it was something you'd never see anywhere else. It was all made of silk malachite, that's a kind you get sometimes. It's stone but it looks like silk, you want to take and stroke it.

Here's bad luck, thought the lad. Can I get off before she sees me?.. He'd heard, you see, from the old folks that the Mistress, the Malachite Maid, liked to beguile folks and fool them.

But he'd barely thought of it when she turned round. She gave him a merry look and then she laughed and said jestingly: "How's this, Stepan Petrovich, will ye stare at a maid's beauty and give naught for the looking? For a peep ye must pay! Come here, closer. Let's talk a bit."



The lad was frightened all right, but he didn't show it. He took hold of his courage. She might be a demon, but all the same she was a maid. Well, and he was a lad, and a lad must think shame to let a maid see him fainthearted.

"I've no time for chat," said he, "we've slept too long anyway. We're going to take a look at our grass, how it's coming along."

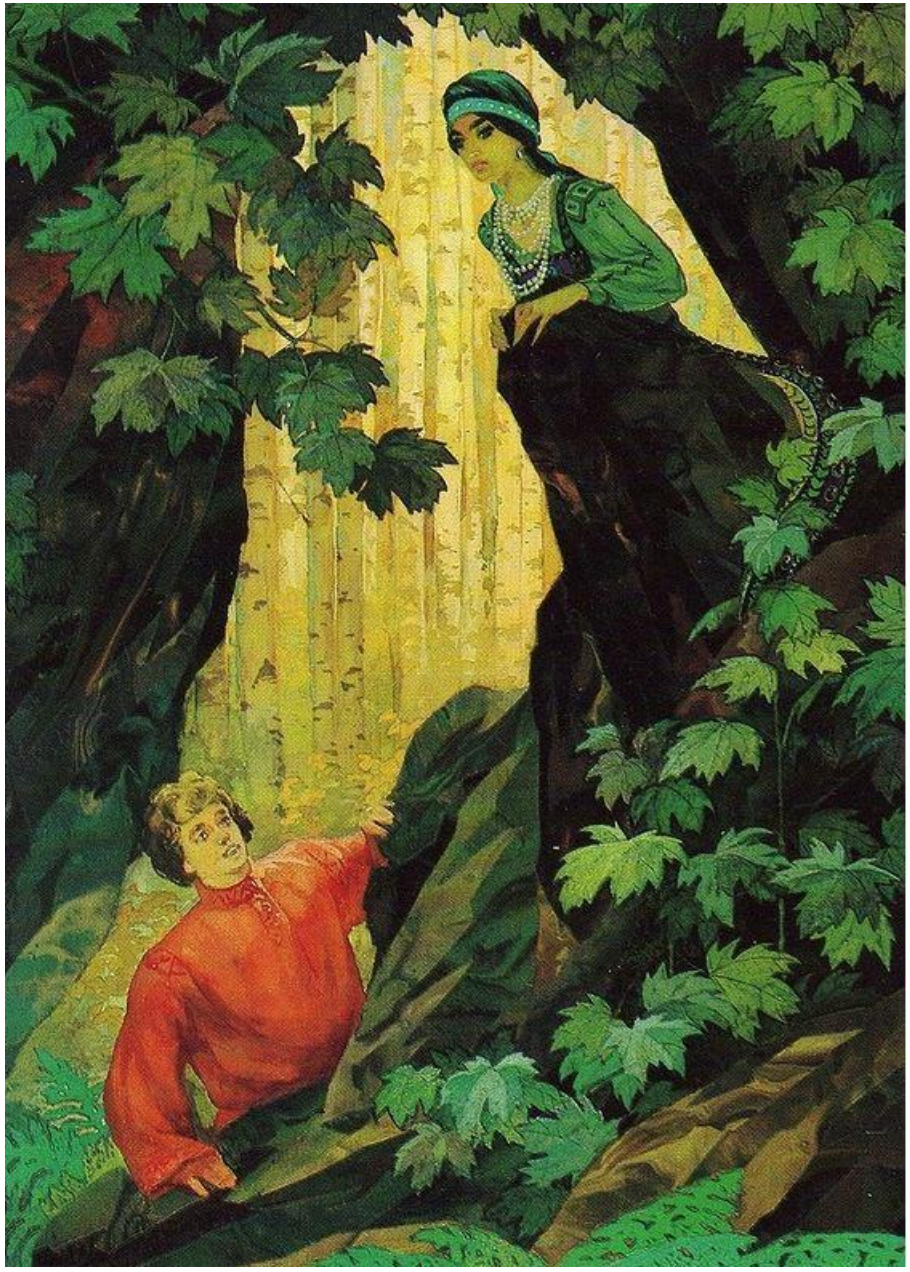
She laughed, then she said: "Have done with your make believe. Come here, I tell ye, there's a thing we must talk of."

Well, the lad saw there was no way out. He went up, and she beckoned him to come round the pile of ore to the other side. He went, and there he saw a lot of lizards, more than you could count. And all of them different. Some were green, and some light blue, and some dark blue, every shade and colour, and some were like clay or sand with golden specks. And some shone like glass or mica, and some were like withered grass and some had all sorts of patterns on them.

The maid just sat and laughed. "Don't tread on my soldiers, Stepan Petrovich," she said. "Look how big and heavy you are, and they're but tiny." Then she clapped her hands and all the lizards ran this way and that and left him a clear path.

He came right up to her and stopped, and she clapped her hands again. "Now there's nowhere ye can tread," she said, and she was still laughing at him. "If ye crush my servants — it will be bad."

He looked down and he could not see the earth at all. All the lizards had crowded together, like a patterned floor round his feet. He looked again and—why, it was copper ore! Every sort and finely polished. And there was mica, and blende, and colours like malachite.



"Well, d'ye know who I am now, Stepanushko?" asked the Malachite Maid, and burst right out in peals of laughter. Then she stopped and said: "Don't be afraid. I'll do ye no harm."

The lad was shamed and angered too to have a maid laugh at him and speak words like that. He got so hot he even shouted at her.

"Who would I be afraid of, when I work in the mine!"

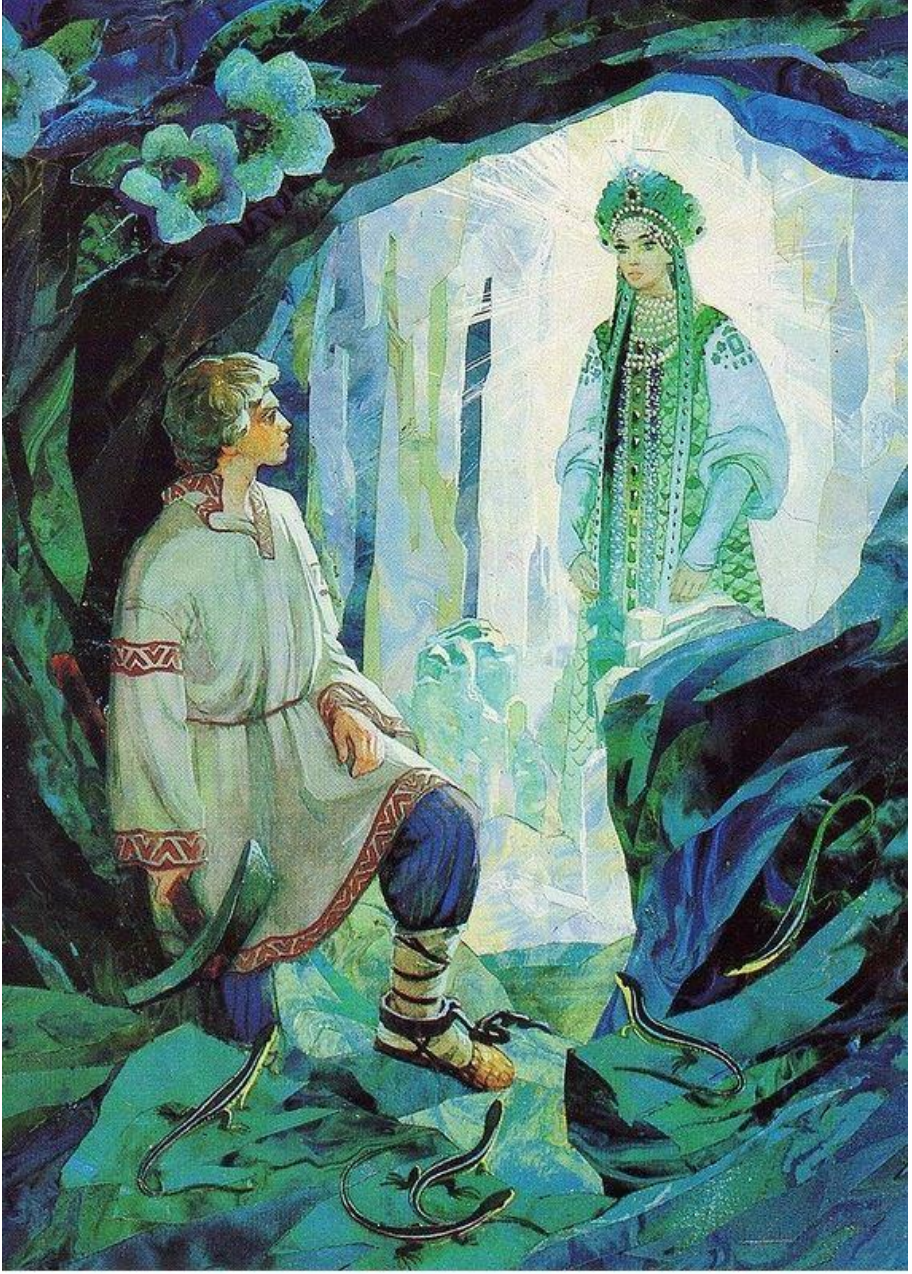
"That is well," said the Malachite Maid. "That's the one I need, one who fears naught. When ye go down the mine tomorrow the bailiff will be there. Tell him this, and see ye forget no word of it. The Mistress of the Copper Mountain, you must say, has ordered you, ye stinking goat, to get out of the Krasnogorsk mine. If you break up my cap of iron there, I shall sink all the copper in Gumeshky so deep ye'll never find it again."

That's what she said, and then she looked at him hard.

"D'ye understand, Stepanushko? You work in the mine, you say, and there's naught you fear? Then tell the bailiff what I bid ye. And now go, but say naught to your companion there. He's all tired, worn out he is, no need to worry him and get him into trouble. I've told one of my lizards to help him a bit."

She clapped her hands again and all the lizards scattered. And she herself, she jumped up and took hold of the rock with her hands, then she skipped on to it and started running about on all fours like a lizard. And instead of hands and feet she had little green paws and a tail came out and there was a black stripe that went half way down the back, but the head was still a maid's. She ran up on top of the pile of rock and then she looked back.

"Don't forget, Stepanushko, what you're to say. The Mistress orders you, ye stinking goat, to get out of Krasnogorka... Tell him that and I'll marry you!"



The lad actually spat in his disgust. "Ugh—a reptile! Me—marry a lizard!"

She saw it and she laughed.

"Be it so," she cried. "We'll talk about it afterwards. Maybe ye'll think better of it?"

Then she was gone round the rock with a flick of her green tail.

The lad was left alone. It was very quiet. All he could hear was his companion snoring behind the pile of ore. He wakened the man and they went to their meadows to see how the grass looked, and returned in the evening. And all the time Stepan kept thinking and thinking—what should he do? To say that to the bailiff wasn't a small thing, and it was true, as well, he did stink, folks said there was something rotting inside him. But not to say it—that was fearsome too. After all, she was the Mistress. She could turn any ore you found into worthless blende. And how would he get his task done then? But most of all, he was ashamed to show himself an empty braggart before a maid.

He thought and he thought, and he took courage.

"Let come what may, but I'll do what she ordered."

Next morning when the men were waiting by the cage, the bailiff came along. Of course they all took off their caps and stood silent, but Stepanushko marched right up to him.

"I saw the Mistress of the Copper Mountain yesterday," he said. "And she orders you, ye stinking goat, to get out of Krasnogorka. And if ye spoil this iron cap, she says, she'll sink all the copper in Gumeshky so deep nobody'll ever get at it."

The bailiff's very whiskers shook with rage.

"What's that? What's that? Are ye drunk or daft? What Mistress? Who d'ye think you're talking to? You—I'll make ye rot in the pit!"

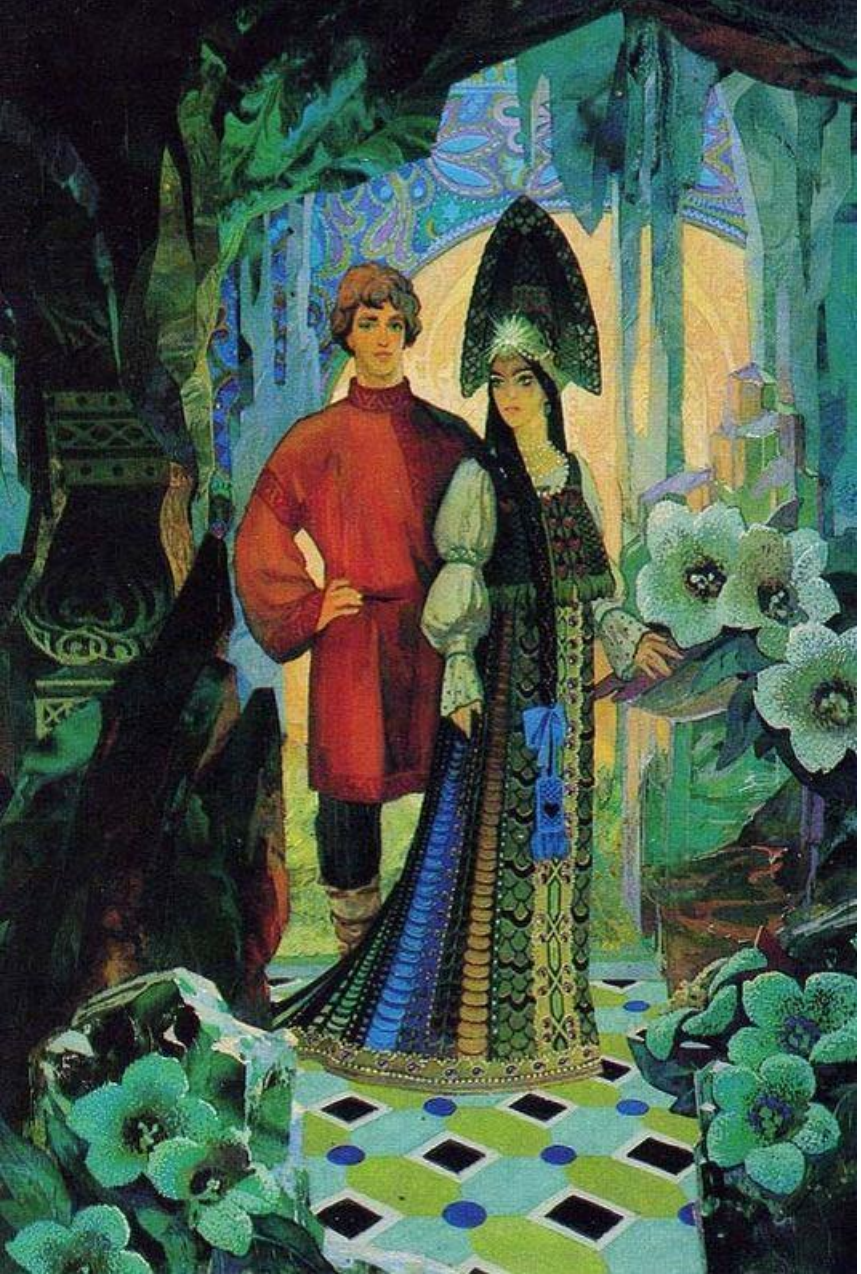
"Have it your own way," said Stepan. "It's what she told me to say."

"Flog him!" yelled the bailiff. "And send him down the pit and fetter him in the working. Feed him the dogs' oats to keep life in him and give him the full task, no easement. And if he tries any tricks—flog him again."

Well, of course, the lad was flogged and sent down. The overseer, as big a cur as the bailiff, put Stepan in the worst working he could find. It was wet and there was no good ore, it ought to have been abandoned long ago. And there they fastened him with a long chain, so he'd be able to work. You know what it was in those days—serfdom, they abused folks all they wanted. And the overseer jeered at him. "Cool down a bit here," he said, "and your task'll be pure malachite—so-and-so much," and the amount he said was out of all sense or reason.

Naught to be done. As soon as the overseer had gone Stepan started to swing his pick, and he was a brisk, able young fellow. When he looked, he was real pleased at what he saw. For malachite came tumbling down as if someone was throwing it. And all the water had drained away somewhere, so it was quite dry.

Well, he thought, that's not so bad. Seems like the Mistress hasn't forgotten me. And while he was thinking it, there came a flash of light and there was the Mistress herself standing in front of him.



"You're a lad of mettle, Stepan Petrovich," she said. "Ye can be proud of yourself. Ye weren't feared of the stinking goat. Ye spoke well. Come and see my dowry. I too stand by my word."

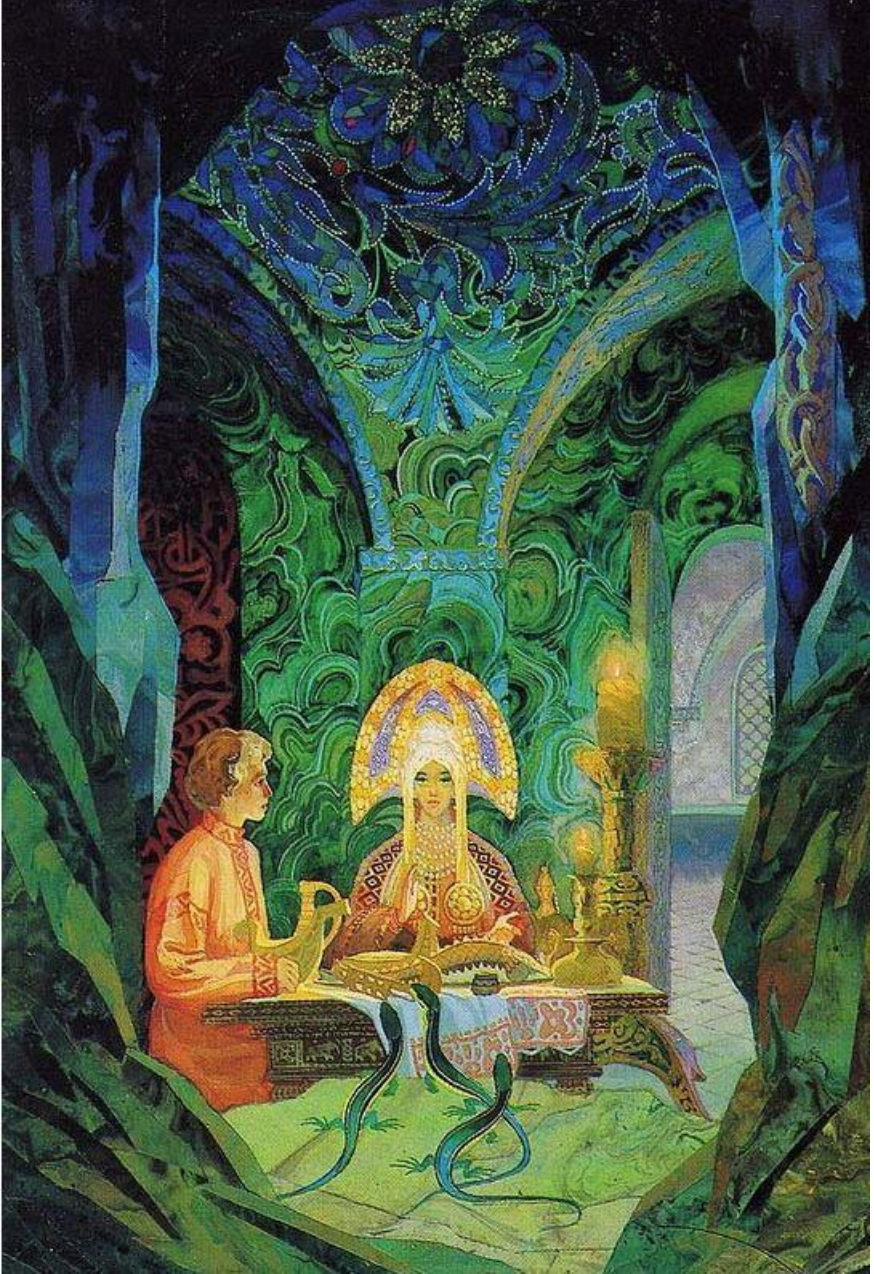
But she was frowning as if she didn't like it much. She clapped her hands and all the lizards came running up and took the chain off Stepan, and then the Mistress gave them her orders. "Get ready double the task, and see it's all the best silk malachite." Then she turned to Stepan again. "Come, my betrothed, and see my dowry."

They went into the mountain, she in front, Stepan following behind. Wherever she turned, it opened before her. It was like great chambers underneath the ground, and all the walls different. Some were green, and some were yellow with golden specks, and others again had copper flowers on them. There were blue walls too, of lapis lazuli. The way it was, no words can tell. And her robe, too, it kept changing. Sometimes it shone like glass, and then it would shimmer with colours, or sparkle like it had diamonds all over it, or go coppery red and then shine a silky green again. So they went on and on, until at last she stopped.

"After this," she said, "there's but yellow and grey rock for many versts. Naught to see. But here, we're right under Krasnogorka. After Gumeshky, this is the plaice I love best.“

Stepan saw they were in a huge chamber, with a couch, and tables and stools all pure copper. The walls were of malachite studded with diamonds and the roof dark crimson with a tinge of black, and flowers of copper on it.

"Let's sit down here," she said, "and talk a bit."



They sat down on stools and the Malachite Maid said: "Now you have seen my dowry."

"Aye, I've seen it," said Stepan.

"Well, and now what do you say to marrying me?"

Stepan didn't know what to say. You see, he had a betrothed maid already. A good maid, an orphan. Of course if you put her beside the Mistress, she was nowhere for looks. Just an ordinary maid like you see every day. Stepan stuttered arid stumbled, and "Your dowry's enough for a Tsar," he said, "but I'm just an ordinary plain fellow, a worker."

"My friend," said she, "stop hedging and speak out. Will ye marry me or not?" And she frowned till her brows met.

So then Stepan just said plain and straight: "I can't. I'm promised."

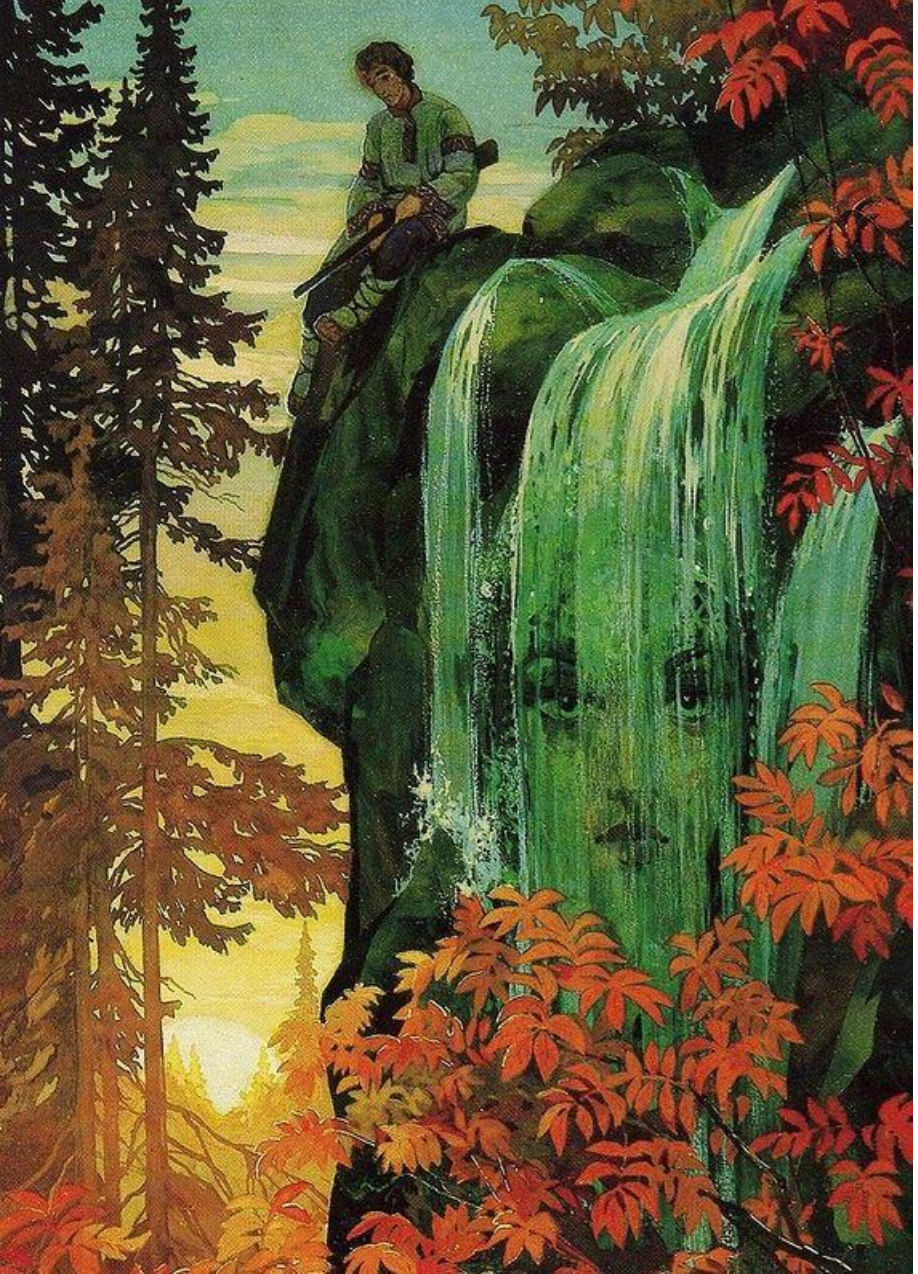
He waited. Now she'll be really angry, he thought. But she seemed sort of pleased, even.

"True heart, Stepanushko," she said. "I praised ye for the bailiff, but I have double praise for this. You didn't snatch at my wealth, you didn't give up your Nastasya for a maid of stone." It was quite right, Nastasya was his sweetheart's name. "And now," she said, "here is a gift for your maid." She gave him a casket of malachite. And inside, jewels and ornaments of every sort. Rings and earrings and such, even the richest maid didn't have the like.

"But how," asked Stepan, "am I to get such a thing out of here?"

"Don't ye fret about that. All will be done, and I'll get ye away from the bailiff too, and ye'll live in plenty with your young wife, only beware—see ye don't get thinking and remembering me after. That'll be my third test."

She clapped her hands and the lizards came running in again and laid the table with all sorts of things. She fed him good cabbage soup and buns stuffed with fish, and mutton and boiled grain and all sorts, the way the Russian custom is at feasts.



When he'd finished she said: "Now fare ye well, Stepan Petrovich, and see ye don't remember me." And there she was in tears. She held out her hand and the tears fell down—drop-drop-drop into her hand, and turned into hard grains, a whole handful. "Here," she said, "take these for a nestegg. Much money is given for these stones. You will be rich." And she gave them to him.

The stones were cold, but her hand, now, it was hot, like it was live, and it trembled a bit too.

Stepan took the stones and he bowed low and then he asked: "Where shall I go?" And he was sort of downcast himself. She pointed, and a way opened in front of him, like a drift, and it was as light as day in it. Stepan followed the drift, and again he passed all the wealth of underground, till at last he found himself back in his own working. Then the drift closed behind him and all was as it had been. A lizard ran in and put the chain back on his leg, and the casket suddenly got quite tiny so he could hide it inside his shirt. Soon after that the overseer came along to jeer at him, but stopped and stared—for Stepan had done much more than the task set, all fine malachite, you couldn't find better anywhere. Now how's this, he thought, where's all this come from?.. He climbed down and took a good look.

"Ye can get anything ye want in this working, seemingly," said he. So he had Stepan taken to another, and put his own nephew in that one.

When Stepan started working the next day, malachite came tumbling down again, and nuggets of pure copper; but that nephew—all he could get was rock and blende. So the overseer smelt something queer and went to the bailiff with it.

"Stepan," said he, "must ha' sold his soul to the devil."

"That's his own business, who he's sold it to," said the bailiff. "Ours is to make all we can out of it. Tell him he'll be a free man if he finds a hunk of malachite of a hundred poods."

What with all this, the bailiff had the chain taken off Stepan, and he had all work stopped on Krasnogorka, too. Who can tell, he thought, maybe that dolt spoke truly. And the ore's getting mixed with copper anyway, only spoils the iron.

The overseer told Stepan what the bailiff had said, and Stepan answered: "Who doesn't want his freedom? I'll do my best, but whether I find it, that's as luck goes."

Soon Stepan did find a hunk like the overseer told him. They lugged it up to the top, and the overseer and the bailiff were real proud of it. "See what we've got," they said. But they didn't give Stepan his freedom. They wrote a letter about it to their Master, and he came himself, all the way from that Petersburg to take a look at it. He heard all about it and he had Stepan come to him.

"I give ye my word as a gentleman," said he, "to set ye free if you find me a piece of malachite big enough to make columns thirty-five feet long."

But Stepan said: "I've been made game of once already. I'll not be caught twice in the same snare. First write me a paper that I'm free, then I'll try, and we'll see what comes of it."

Well, of course the Master shouted at him and stamped his foot, but Stepan just went on talking.

"Aye, and I near forgot—there's a maid I'm plighted to, write a paper making her free too, or what'll it be, I'm free but my wife's still a serf."

The Master saw Stepan was not to be turned, so he wrote out a paper.

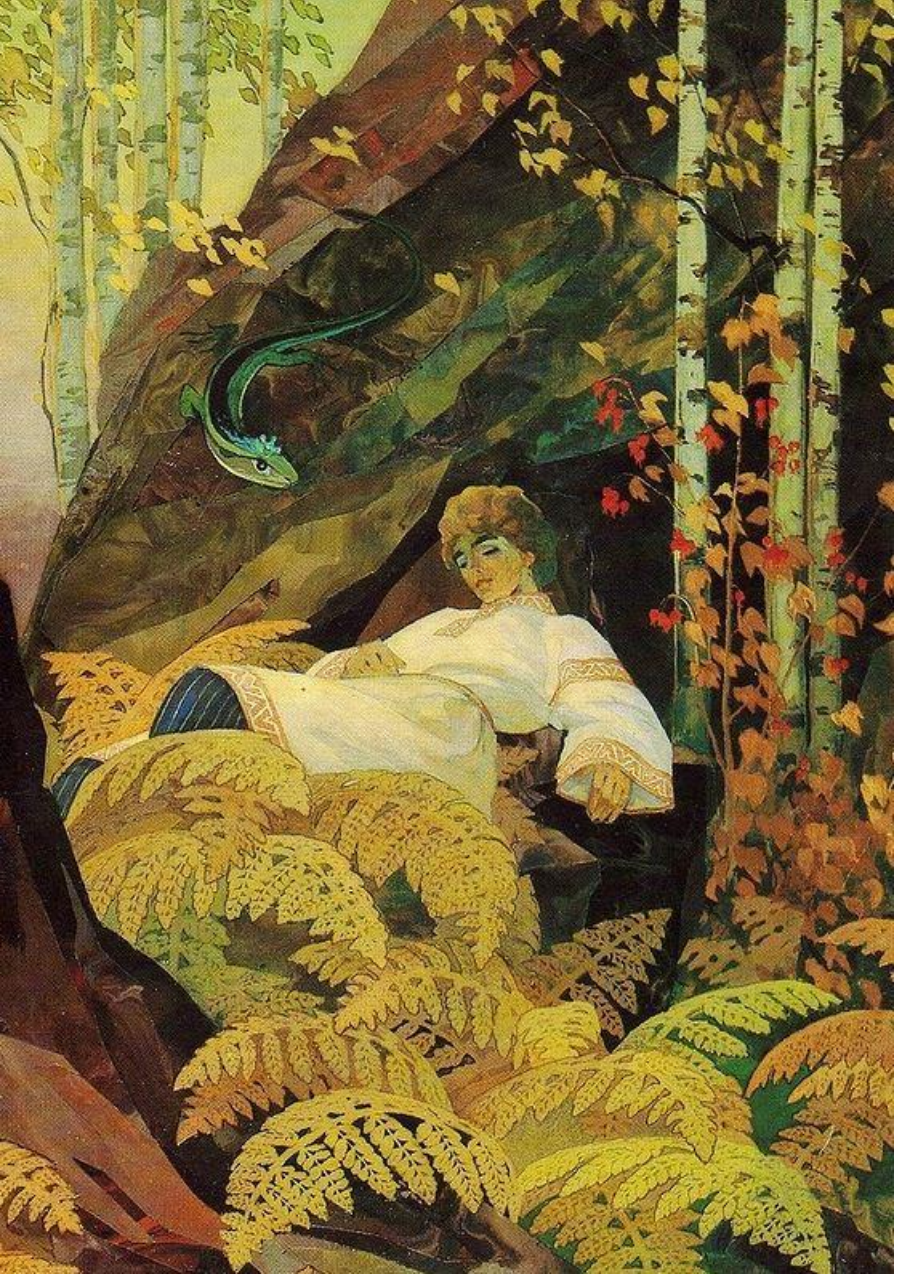
"There," he said, "but now see you do your best."

Stepan only answered: "That's as luck goes.“

Of course he found it. Easy enough for him, when he knew all the inside of the mountain and had the Mistress herself helping him. They carved columns out of it, the way they wanted them, and hauled them to the top, and the Master sent them as a gift to the very biggest church in all St. Petersburg. And that hunk Stepan found first, they say it's still in our town. It's kept as a curiosity.

Well, after that Stepan was free. And then it seemed like the riches of Gumeshky all vanished. There was a lot of lapis lazuli, but mostly it was just blende they found. Never a sign of copper nuggets, and no malachite, and water started coming in. It got worse and worse, till at last all the mine was flooded. Folks said the Mistress was angry about the pillars, because they'd been put in a church. And churches were something she'd no use for at all.

Stepan was never really happy, though. He married and there were children, and he built himself a house, everything right and fine. You'd have said he'd all to make a man glad, but he went about moping and his health and strength went. He just pined right away.



But sick as he was, he took it into his head to go hunting. He'd pick up his shot-gun and away to Krasnogorsk mine, but he never brought a thing home. Then one day, it was in the autumn, he went and he didn't come back. He didn't come and didn't come... Where could he be? Well, of course, folks went out to seek him. And they found him, lying dead by a great rock, and he was smiling; his shot-gun lay there beside him, it hadn't even been fired. The ones that got there first, they said they saw a green lizard by him, such a big one as none had ever seen in our parts. It was sitting there by the dead man, its head up and tears dropping. But as soon as they came close it ran up on to the rock and disappeared. And when they brought Stepan home and started to lay him out they found one hand closed tight, but they could just see something green in it, little grains, a whole handful. And there was one there as knew something about it, and he looked and said: "Those are copper emeralds! They're rare stones, and cost a mint o' money. That's a fortune he's left ye, Nastasya. Where did he get them?"

Nastasya, that was Stepan's wife, she said he'd never told her a word about the stones. The malachite casket he'd given her before they married. It had many rare things in it, but no stones like those. She'd never seen them before.

They started getting the stones out of Stepan's dead hand—and what d'you think?—they all crumbled into dust. So no one ever knew where he'd got them. After that they tried digging in Krasnogorka. But all they found was ore, brown, with copper in it. But then someone found out those were the tears the Mistress of the Copper Mountain had dropped. He'd never sold them, he'd kept them and let none see them, and when he died he took them with him. Aye.

That's what she's like, the Mistress of the Copper Mountain.

It's a chancy thing to meet her, it brings woe for a bad man, and for a good one there's little joy comes of it.